

Gus Heningburg Does Not Need This Story...

...but You Might Learn a Bit More about a Public Figure - and Private Person

By JANICE NEWMAN

If there's one man who doesn't need publicity, it's Gustav Heningburg, president of the Greater Newark Urban Coalition.

Hardly a week passes when he isn't quoted on some issue in the newspapers. Every Sunday at 5:30 p.m., he's the co-host on "Positively Black" on Channel 4. His accomplishments have been documented countless times in articles and citations.

In the May issue of "Newark!" magazine, Heningburg was described as "forceful, and often controversial," which pretty much sums up the public side of Gus Heningburg. Publicly, he is dedicated to achieving for minorities "full and equal access to every institution and benefit in our society. That includes housing, education, employment, unemployment, etc."

Those who work with him regard him as tireless and always available to give assistance. During the negotiations in the Stella Wright tenants' rent strike, it was not unusual for the lawyers to call Heningburg in the middle of the night for discussion.

When a reporter from the New York Daily News decided to do a story on one day in the life of Gustav Heningburg and tried to follow Gus around, he gave up at 6 p.m., after 12 hours of activity. An 18-hour day for Gus is a regular occurrence.

"People wonder how I can carry such a full schedule," Heningburg says. "With the kind of public life I live, keeping in shape is almost an absolute necessity."

And keep in shape he does — through swimming, tennis, golf, horseback-riding, water-skiing. He engages in all this athletic activity even though he is a disabled veteran — 30 per cent disabled. "I just endure the pain because I'm not going to stop my activities," he comments.

Born May 18, 1930, in Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, Heningburg spent his youth in character-building activities. While in high school, he had the job of slopping the hogs for his grandfather, which meant collecting the slop from



the white high school, the black high school and the jail every day after school. "I fed them every day except Sundays; I fed them twice on Saturday so I wouldn't have to feed them on Sunday," he recalls.

At age 13 he helped with his grandfather's bail bond business, "where I received an early recognition of bail inequities for blacks and whites."

Heningburg attended four high schools — Durham, N.C.; Winston-Salem, N.C.; George Washington High in New York, and Jamaica High in Queens. He was graduated from high school at 16 and from college at 19.

"I went to college on a combination academic/athletic scholarship. At the age of 16 I had to compete with the returning veterans, who were '20 and older,' for academic and athletic honors and girls." Heningburg was graduated with a B.S. degree.

He recalls his first organizing effort during the summer before his freshman year in high school:

"I had a job of scrubbing pots and pans in the dining room of North Carolina College for Negroes (now North Carolina Central University) for \$6 a week. I felt that this was not sufficient pay for the amount of effort put in the job, so I organized the other seven workers as a collective bargaining unit, with me as the spokesman. We threatened to quit if we didn't get a raise. We were told there were 200 other boys waiting for my job and I was

given 10 minutes to go back to scrubbing the pots and pans. My first try as an organizer, needless to say, was failure."

Heningburg's second try at being an organizer came during his sophomore year in college. At that time he organized the athletes in a protest against the food served at Hampton Institute. They threatened to shut down the athletic activities unless better food was served; "this effort was successful," he says.

Of all his interests, sports stands out. During his youth he participated in baseball, basketball, football, etc. While in the army he coached the basketball, and track and field teams. Both teams won the All-Army championships in Europe.

As a civilian, he was the second black basketball official in New Jersey. He taught other blacks to be officials at West Kinney Junior High School, and some of these men are now among the first black officials in the NBA. At one time he was a Red Cross water safety instructor, and for years he taught swimming. He presently owns two horses and a colt.

Another sign of his diverse interests is that a few years ago he was the co-producer of "The Believers," an off-Broadway musical show. He also, at one time, taught a Sunday school class. As a youth, he belonged to a church choir.

Heningburg's involvement in various

and controversial issues has caused speculation that he is trying to build a political base.

"There are people who believe, no matter what the office is, from dog catcher to governor, that I ought to run," he observes. During the last mayoral election, he received a call from an enthusiastic supporter who wanted to begin plans for his campaign. Politics is the farthest thing from his mind, he insists.

Heningburg is a man of many contradictions, but the most striking contradiction he summed up this way: "My job requires me to be a very public person. My own instincts and desires cause me to be a very private person socially." These instincts are probably the basis for the belief that Heningburg is a cold, unemotional person. In reality, he's just the opposite.

"I spend more of my private time with children than with adults — my own children as well as others. They tend not to have any preconceived expectations — they are extremely stimulating, mentally and physically. They don't build pedestals."

In his office it is not unusual (during non-crisis periods) for "the chief" to joke with his staff. And after work he displays a surprising good humor.

He spoke of his adaptability: "I am comfortable in urban and rural settings."

"I can go from living in an apartment in the city to getting my horse and going camping for a week. I once just collected the kids, flew to Florida, rented a camper and went to the Everglades for a week; no one could find me but the mosquitoes."

One final note: Gustav Heningburg is basically a non-conformist. The most striking example is his refusal to wear a shirt and tie, even to formal occasions. At his testimonial dinner given by The Newark Airport Businessmen's Council, Gus showed up in a turtleneck sweater and a safari suit.

"People believe my non-conformity is designed to upset people and not just because, for example, I don't like neckties," he explains.